

Creating "Kantri" in Central New Guinea: Relational Ontology and the Categorical Logic of Statecraft

Since their first encounter with colonial administrators in 1963, approximately 2,000 indigenous people living in the Nimakot region of central New Guinea have been struggling with a tension between their indigenous way of life and the imperatives of the state. It is not just that they are on the international border between Papua New Guinea and Indonesia and therefore difficult to categorise into this or that country. It is that they do not habitually conceptualise themselves and others in categorical terms. They value and focus on relationships rather than categories. In their struggle to adapt the blooming buzzing complexities of their semi-nomadic lifestyle and relational logic to the strict and apparently static lines, grids, and coordinates of rationalistic statecraft they have become torn by duelling conceptions of "kantri" itself (Melanesian Tok Pisin for "country"). On the one hand, kantri invokes an unbroken rural landscape rich with personal and cultural memories that establish a firm and deep relationship with the land and the ancestors. Such a notion fits easily with local conceptions of kinship and land tenure. On the other hand, kantri is a bounded object, part of an often frustrating and mystifying system of categorization imposed by strict and rationalist mechanisms of statecraft. The following analyses this tension based on 22 months of intensive and intimate participant observation in the region from 1999-2006 with a special focus on the uses and impacts of writing and other new communication technologies.

The categorical bias of statecraft is enabled, fostered, extended, and maintained by the technology of writing. Statecraft seeks (or makes) categories that are ideally stable, permanent, non-negotiable, and fit for the relative fixity of print, while the relationships emphasised by people of Nimakot are fluid, temporary, negotiable, contested and ambiguous. In contrast to the engaged, pragmatic, and personal view one finds in face-to-face relationships on the ground, the state's knowledge of the local is ultimately mediated by what can be written into abstract categories that can be listed, counted and aggregated, producing a synoptic, distanced, and decontextualising perspective. By simplifying the cacophonous blooming buzzing complexities of life into legible categories, regularities, and rules, the pen and paper become both the eyes and the voice of the state (Scott 2).

Even the writing of this paper is difficult. Many sentences would be easier to write if I could just name the group I am discussing. But the group of people I am writing about have no clear and uncontested name for themselves. More importantly, they do not traditionally think of themselves as a "group," nor do they habitually conceptualise others in terms of bounded groups of individuals. The biggest challenge to statecraft's attempts to create a sense of "country" here is the fact that most local people do not subjectively think of themselves in categorical terms. They do not imagine themselves to be part of "adjacent and competitive empires" (Strathern 102).

This "group" is most widely known as the western "Atbalmin" though the name is not an indigenous term. "Atbalmin" is a word used by the neighbouring Telefol that means "people of the trees." It was adopted by early patrol officers who were accompanied by Telefol translators. As these early patrols made their way through the "Atbalmin" region from east to west they frequently complained about names and their inability to pin or pen them down. Tribal names, clan names, even personal names seemed to change with each asking. While such flexibility and flux were perfectly at home in an oral face-to-face environment, it wasn't suitable for the colonial administrators' relatively fixed and static books.

The "mysterious Kufelmin" (as the patrol reports refer to them) were even more frustrating for early colonial officers. Patrols heading west from Telefomin searched for decades for this mysterious group and never found them. To this day nobody has ever set foot in a Kufelmin village. In each valley heading west patrols were told that the Kufelmin were in the next valley to the west. But the Kufelmin were never there. They were always

one more valley to the west. The problem was that the administrators wrongly assumed “Kufelmin” to be a tribal name as stable and categorical as the forms and maps they were using would accept. Kufelmin simply means “those people to the West.” It is a relational term, not a categorical one.

The administration’s first contact with the people of Nimakot exposed even more fundamental differences and specific tensions between the local relational logic and the categorical bias of statecraft. Australian patrol officer JR McArthur crested the mountain overlooking Nimakot at precisely 1027 hours on 16 August 1963, a fact he dutifully recorded in his notebook (Telefomin Patrol Report 12 of 1962/63). He then proceeded down the mountain with pen and paper in hand, recording the precise moment he crossed the Sunim creek (1109 hours), came to Sunimbil (1117 hours), and likewise on and on to his final destination near the base of the present-day airstrip. Such recordings of precise times and locations were central to McArthur’s main goal. Amidst the steep mountains painted with lush green gardens, sparkling waterfalls, and towering virgin rainforests McArthur busied himself examining maps and aerial photographs searching for the region’s most impressive, imposing, and yet altogether invisible feature: the 141st Meridian East of Greenwich, the international border. McArthur saw his work as one of fixing boundaries, taking names, and extending the great taxonomic system of statecraft that would ultimately “rationalise” and order even this remote corner of the globe. When he came to the conclusion that he had inadvertently stepped outside his rightful domain he promptly left, noting in his report that he purchased a pig just before leaving.

The local understanding of this event is very different. While McArthur was busy making and obeying categories, the people of Nimakot were primarily concerned with making relationships. In this case, they hoped to create a relationship through which valuable goods, the likes of which they had never seen, would flow. The pig mentioned in McArthur’s report was not meant to be bought or sold, but as a gift signifying the beginning of what locals hoped would be a long relationship. When McArthur insisted on paying for it and then promptly left with a promise that he would never return, locals interpreted his actions as an accusation of witchcraft.

Witchcraft is the most visible and dramatic aspect of the local relational logic of being, what might be termed a relational ontology. Marilyn Strathern describes this ontology as being as much “dividual” as individual, pointing out that Melanesians tend to conceptualise themselves as defined and constituted by social relationships rather than independent from them (102). The person is conceptualised as socially and collectively constituted rather than individuated. A person’s strength, health, intelligence, disposition, and behaviour depend on the strength and nature of one’s relationships (Knauff 26). The impacts of this relational ontology on local life are far reaching. Unconditional kindness and sharing are constantly required to maintain healthy relations because unhealthy relations are understood to be the direct cause of sickness, infertility, and death. Where such misfortunes do befall someone, their explanations are sought in a complex calculus examining relational histories. Whoever has a bad relation with the victim is blamed for their misfortune. Modernists disparage such ideas as “witchcraft beliefs” but witchcraft accusations are just a small part of a much more pervasive, rich, and logical relational ontology in which the health and well-being of relations are conceptualised as influencing the health and well-being of things and people.

Because of this logic, people of Nimakot are relationship experts who navigate the complex relational field with remarkable subtleness and tact. But even they cannot maintain the unconditional kindness and sharing that is required of them when their social world grows too large and complex. A village rarely grows to over 50 people before tensions lead to an irresolvable witchcraft accusation and the village splits up. In this way, the continuous negotiations inspired by the relational ontology lead to constant movement, changing of names, and shifting clan affiliations – nothing that fits very well on a static map or a few categories in a book.

Over the past 45 years since McArthur first brought the mechanisms of statecraft into Nimakot, the tensions between this local relational ontology and the categorical logic of the state have never been resolved. One might think that a synthesis of the two forms would have emerged. Instead, to this day, all that becomes new is the form through which the tensions are expressed and the ways in which the tensions are exacerbated.

The international border has been and continues to be the primary catalyst for these tensions to express themselves. As it turns out, McArthur had miscalculated. He had not crossed the international border before

coming to Nimakot. It was later determined that the border runs right through the middle of Nimakot, inspiring one young local man to describe it to me as “that great red mark that cuts us right through the heart.” The McArthur encounter was a harbinger of what was to come; a battle for kantri as unbounded connected landscape, and a battle with kantri as a binding categorical system, set against a backdrop of witchcraft imagery.

Locals soon learned the importance of the map and census for receiving state funds for construction projects, education, health care, and other amenities. In the early 1970s a charismatic local man convinced others to move into one large village called Tumolbil. The large population literally put Tumolbil “on the map,” dramatically increasing its visibility to government and foreign aid. Drawn by the large population, an airstrip, school, and aid post were built in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Locally this process is known as “namba tok,” meaning that “numbers (population, statistics, etc.) talk” to the state. The greater the number, the stronger the voice, so locals are now intent on creating large stable villages that are visible to the state and in line for services and development projects. Yet their way of life and relational cultural logics continue to betray their efforts to create such villages. Most people still navigate the complexities of their social relations by living in small, scattered, semi-nomadic hamlets. Even as young local men trained in Western schools become government officials in charge of the maps and census books themselves, they are finding that they are frustrated by the same characteristics of life that once frustrated colonial administrators.

The tensions between the local relational ontology and the categorical imperatives of the state come to rest squarely on the shoulders of these young men. They want large stable villages that will produce a large number in the census book in order to bring development projects to their land. More importantly, they recognise that half of their land rests precariously west of that magical 141st Meridian. A clearly defined and distinct place on the map along with a solid number of names in the census book, have become essential to assuring their continued connection with their kantri. On several occasions they have felt threatened by the possibility that they would have to either abandon the land west of the meridian or become citizens of Indonesia. The first option threatens their sense of kantri as connection to their traditional land. The other violates their new found sense of kantri as nationalistic pride in the independent state of Papua New Guinea.

In an attempt to resolve these increasingly pressing tensions, the officers designed “Operation Clean and Sweep” in 2003 – a plan to move people out of their small scattered hamlets and into one of twelve larger villages that had been recognised by Papua New Guinea in previous census and mapping exercises. After sending notice to hamlet residents, an operation team of over one hundred men marched throughout Nimakot, burning each hamlet along the way. Before each burning, officers gave a speech peppered with the phrase “namba tok.” Most people listened to the speeches with enthusiasm, often expressing their own eagerness to leave their hamlet behind to live in a large orderly village. In one hamlet they asked me to take a photo of them in front of their houses just before they cheerfully allowed government officers to enter their homes and light the thatch of their rooftops. “Finally,” the officer in charge exclaimed triumphantly, “we can put people where their names are.”

If the tension between local relational logics and the categorical imperatives of the state had been only superficial, perhaps this plan would have ultimately resolved the tension. But the tension is not only expressed objectively in the need for large stable villages, but subjectively as well, in the state’s need for people to orient themselves primarily as citizens and individuals, doing what is best for the country as a categorical group rather than acting as relational “dividuals” and orienting their lives primarily towards the demands of kinship and other relations.

This tension has been recognised in other contexts as well, and theorised in Craig Calhoun’s study of nationalism in which he marks out two related distinctions: “between networks of social relationships and categories of similar individuals, and between reproduction through directly interpersonal interactions and reproduction through the mediation of relatively impersonal agencies of large-scale cultural standardization and social organization” (29). The former in both of these distinctions make up the essential components of relational ontology, while the latter describe the mechanisms and logic of statecraft. To describe the form of personhood implicit in nationalism, Calhoun introduces the term “categorical identity” to designate “identification by similarity of attributes as a member of a set of equivalent members” (42).

While locals are quick to understand the power of categorical entities in the cultural process of statecraft and therefore have eagerly created large villages on a number of occasions in order to “game” the state system, they do not readily assume a categorical identity, an identity with these categories, and the villages have consistently disintegrated over time due to relational tensions and witchcraft accusations born from the local relational ontology.

Operation Clean and Sweep reached its crisis moment just two days after the burnings began. An influential man from one of the unmapped hamlets scheduled for burning came to the officers complaining that he would not move to the large government village because he would have to live too close to people who had bewitched and killed members of his family. Others echoed his fears of witchcraft in the large government villages. The drive for a categorical order came head to head with the local relational ontology. Moving people into large government villages and administering a peaceful, orderly, lawful society of citizens (a categorical identity) would take much more than eliminating hamlets and forced migration. It would require a complete transformation in their sense of being – a transformation that even the officers themselves have not fully undertaken.

The officers did not see the relational ontology as the problem. They saw witchcraft as the problem. They announced plans to eradicate witchcraft altogether. For three months, witchcraft suspects were apprehended, interrogated, and asked to list names of other witches. With each interrogation, the list of witches grew longer and longer. The interrogations were violent at times, but not as violent or as devastating as the list itself. The violence of the list hid behind its simple elegance. Like a census book, it had a mystique of orderliness and rationality. It stripped away the ugliness and complexity of interrogations leaving nothing but pure categorical knowledge.

In the interrogation room, the list became a powerful tool the officer in charge used to intimidate his suspects. He often began by reading from the list, as if to say, “we already have you right here.” But one might say it was the officer who was really trapped in the list. It ensnared him in its simple elegance, its clean straight lines and clear categories. He was not using the list as much as the list was using him.

Traditionally it was not the witch that was of concern, but the act of witchcraft itself. If the relationship could be healed – thereby healing the victim – all was forgiven. The list transformed the accused from temporary, situational, and indefinite witches involved in local relational disputes to permanent, categorical witches in violation of state law. Traditional ways of dealing with witchcraft focused on healing relationships. The print culture of the state focuses on punishing the categorically “guilty” categorical individual. They were “sentenced” “by the book.”

As an outsider, I was simply thought to be naïve about the workings of witchcraft. My protests were ignored (see Wesch). Ultimately it ended because making a list of witches proved to be even more difficult than making a list for the census. Along with the familiar challenges of shifting names and affiliations, the witch list made its own enemies. The moment somebody was listed all of their relations ceased recognising the list and those making it as authoritative.

In the end, the same tensions that motivated Operation Clean and Sweep were only reproduced by the efforts to resolve them. The tensions demonstrated themselves to be more tenacious than anticipated, grounded as they are in pervasive self-sustaining cultural systems that do not overlap in a way that is significant enough to threaten their mutual existence. The relational ontology is embedded in rich and enduring local histories of gift exchange, marriage, birth, death, and conflict. Statecraft is embedded in a broader system of power, hierarchy, deadlines, roles, and rules. They are not simply matters of belief. In this way, the focus on witches and witchcraft could never resolve the tensions. Instead, the movement only exacerbated the relational tensions that inspire, extend, and maintain witchcraft beliefs, and once again people found themselves living in small, scattered hamlets, wishing they could somehow come together to live in large prosperous villages so their population numbers would be great enough to “talk” to the state, bringing in valuable services, and more importantly, securing their land and citizenship with Papua New Guinea. It is in this context that “kantri” not only embodies the tensions between local ways of life and the imperatives of the state, but also the persistent

hope for resolution, and the haunting memories of previous failures.

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